

FRIENDS OF THE RIDGEWAY



Autumn

2006

NEWSLETTER

RITCHIE'S RAMBLINGS

The role of Chairman of your society is unpaid and carries no other benefits in kind. Recently, however, it gave me a wonderful and privileged opportunity. For the past two years I have sat as a member of the Council of Partners of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. I am one of two members representing Recreation and Leisure interests within the AONB. Through the Council of Partners I established a useful contact with the representative from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

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Website: www.ridgewayfriends.org.uk

At a meeting of the Council earlier this year, my RSPB contact asked if I would like to visit one of their protected sites, not far from The Ridgeway. That was why I walked up to The Ridgeway on a gorgeous summer afternoon with our Membership Secretary, Janet Hierons, and a bird watching expert from my village. I am not a keen birdwatcher, although I have a passing knowledge and believe that I am reasonably observant. How wrong can you be! In the short walk, our expert pointed out Greenfinch, Whitethroats, Buzzards and a Kestrel that I would otherwise have missed.

When we neared the site, we were met by Mike Shurmer of the RSPB, who guided us to the protected area, some way off The Ridgeway. Mike set up his high powered telescope and showed us where to look. I needed his help as otherwise I would have missed seeing the strange and very rare Stone-curlews. The birds stand motionless for long periods and their camouflage is excellent. They stand erect, scanning around with their incredible large yellow eyes. We watched them for some time before walking back down to East Ilsley as the sun dropped in the sky.

I understand that there are only three places in the UK where Stone-curlew are breeding. How pleasing it is that one of these is close to our beloved Ridgeway.

Although I cannot offer you the same opportunity that I had, I can offer you the next best thing. Mike Shurmer has kindly agreed to be the guest speaker at our Annual General Meeting next year and give an illustrated talk about birds of The Ridgeway! I expect the Stone-curlew will get a mention or two!

Ian Ritchie

*Your chairman, snapped here in Vancouver,
always travels with his Acme Portable
Ridgeway sign.*

**NERCA ROUND 2
HELP WANTED !**

NERCA Part 6 extinguished unrecorded vehicular rights but allowed some claims to escape the net - those made before 20 Jan 05. About 800 of them. That escape, alias "exemption", is however dependent on the claims being compliant with the requirements of Schedule 14 Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The compliance rules have hitherto been administered in a relaxed way because they were not important. They now take on a new meaning, because extinguishment depends on them. Test runs in the Yorkshire Dales and Hampshire show that some highway authorities are not taking this new meaning seriously or consistently. Some of the fish that were thought to have escaped can still be caught but it needs fishermen to do so. Will you be a fisherman?

As readers will recall, GLEAM founded a major national alliance known as the Green Lanes Protection Group. GLPG is questioning whether claims meet the test of exemption on a county by county basis and asks for those who are prepared to conduct this questioning to step forward. A model request for information will be supplied together with a guidance note as to what we are looking for and how to handle it. Individual guidance will be provided as required. Every claim unseated is another route potentially saved for the environment and normal users.

There are about 120 highway authorities. Of those, 62 are known to have potentially exempt claims. The objective is to get one principal contact per relevant authority. As the exercise may involve inspecting files, additional volunteers may be enlisted to help where claims are numerous. Anyone feeling strongly about vehicles desecrating the countryside and willing to help should contact Graham Plumbe on 01252 850282. Alternatively, e-mail ridgewayfriends@aol.com

Friends AGM
Ridgeway Centre
25th March 2007

Agenda and other details in the next Newsletter

**NEW BUNKHOUSE 'STRIKES' GOLD
(Reprinted by courtesy of the YHA)**

A newly renovated bunkhouse set in a converted skittle alley and attached to a real ale pub has been leaving guests 'bowled over' in Wiltshire. Recently opened YHA Clyffe Pypard is conveniently located right next to the Goddard Arms and has already welcomed a steady stream of visitors from all over the world.

It is run by operators Raymond and Libby Orchard, who have been stunned by the array of nationalities of visitors heading to the tranquil and scenic village. We've had a terrific start to business with guests from New Zealand, Australia, Iran, Samoa, Canada and the US not to mention a whole host of European nations," said Libby.

The 16-bed bunkhouse has been converted from a skittle alley into comfortable accommodation, ideal for groups or individuals visiting the Ridgeway, Wiltshire Cycle Way or the Chilterns Raymond and Libby converted the bunkhouse themselves; creating a kitchen, three bunkrooms, showers and toilets, thanks to Rural Renaissance who part-funded the project.

YHA South West Regional Manager Noel Preston-Jones said: "I'm sure visitors will be delighted with the bunkhouse not least because the owners are members of the Campaign for Real Ale!

"This facility joins YHA as part of our Enterprise expansion programme, allowing new and existing accommodation operations to be licensed.

"We then include these operations in our national accommodation guide which goes out to quarter of a million members, and feature them on our national website at www.yha.org.uk.

"YHA is constantly working in partnership with local authorities, other charities and private operators to develop the network of accommodation available to our members."

Overnight prices at YHA Clyffe Pypard start from £ 11.00 for adults and £8.00 for children.

The Friends of The Ridgeway has long believed that there is a shortage of cheap accommodation at the western end of the Trail. Here, it is relevant to repeat that in our view the natural terminus is at Pewsey. Can anyone suggest, better still, does anyone actually own a building that might be developed in this way?

THREE SCRAPS OF MODERN HISTORY

Ridgeway Baseline

Someone sent a cutting from the *Estates Gazette* July 10 1993 which mentions that, when the country was retriangulated in 1936 on a metric national grid, two bases were measured: one at Lossiemouth, the other on the Ridgeway in Wiltshire. Fascinating in other respects, the OS website account of the great retriangulation doesn't say exactly where the Ridgeway base line was. Does anyone know? Indeed, does anyone know why these sites were selected?

The baseline for the first triangulation was at Heathrow, but London airport was still in Croydon in 1936, a really smooth transition to the next item.

First Flight Over The Ridgeway

I'm open to informed contradiction on this, but I believe the first manned flight over The Ridgeway took place on July 16th 1824 at around 19:45. It was the first perhaps the only entirely successful flight of an accident-prone aeronaut, George Graham. The earliest balloonists had used hydrogen, hot air or lethal combinations of the two. The chief disadvantage of Hydrogen was the cost, a disadvantage overcome by Charles Green who pioneered the use of coal gas: a mixture of hydrogen, methane and carbon monoxide that was one sixth the price of hydrogen. (As Green's first flight marked the coronation of George IV, one could contrive quite an intricate political allegory here.)

Coal gas may have been one-sixth the price of pure hydrogen but it was also seven or eight times the weight. George Graham tended to leave his passengers behind or crash his balloons because he overestimated the lifting power of coal gas. On his first attempt, a disappointed audience rioted. Despite clogged gas mains and the wrong sort of clouds, Graham persevered. During Bath Race Week in 1824, he ascended in his new silk balloon from Sydney Gardens for the benefit of the Bath General Hospital. At 18:30 with his assistant Mr J Adams he lifted off faultlessly, flew 50 miles in an hour and a half and landed within 5 miles of Ramsbury. To do this, he had to overfly the Ridgeway.

My source *Up, Up and Away An account of ballooning in and around Bristol and Bath 1784 – 1999* written by John Penny for the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, does not say exactly where he landed; local

historians in Ramsbury may know. Neither does a monograph on Bristol and Bath ballooning prove that no one made an earlier flight from somewhere else. Anyone who knows is invited, as usual, to add to the sum of exact information by writing in.

My next snippet is not at all speculative; it is reprinted from the Ramblers' Association's *Footpath Campaigner* Issue 61 – like many plain RA documents, more interesting than the Ramblers' glossy mag tends to be.

Some things never change

Aylesbury Footpaths Secretary, Michael Roe, recently unearthed evidence that the great 'stiles debate' goes back at least 100 years.

Following a land sale in Wendover in 1901 fences and stiles were erected across the line of a footpath which had been used by the public for many years. At a parish council meeting on 11 June 1906 a resolution was passed instructing the parish clerk to write to the landowner telling him to remove the stiles within 7 days or the parish council would take 'whatever action they may consider necessary'. The 7 day deadline came and went so on 21 June 1906 the good folk of Wendover (over 2,000 according to one report) armed with saws and crowbars removed two offending stiles themselves accompanied by much cheering from the crowd.

Common sense prevailed and kissing gates eventually replaced the other stiles on the route and today the footpath is a well-used part of the Ridgeway National Trail. Old and young local ramblers celebrated this fact with a nostalgic walk from Wendover to Coombe Hill on 21 June 2006.

The tendency of bumptious landowners to obstruct paths may not change; the public reaction plainly has. In similar circumstances outside Wells, the locals deployed scythes and a brass band. My father had a story about people parading round the walls of an estate near Bristol blowing a trumpet with reference to Joshua chapter 6. (In the long term, this seems to have worked; it's now a public park) My personal favourite is the Leckhampton incident: a cottage was dismantled, the Riot Act was read and Miss Dorothea Beale, whose complaint triggered all this, though she did not lead her girls in St Trinian's style direct action, did cancel the Cheltenham Ladies' College piano contract with the landowner. Nowadays, some of us might write a stropmy letter to the council: 2,000 people with crowbars? Fat chance. It's enough to convert you to Victorian Values.

Peter Gould

A COCKNEY CLERK'S ENCHANTMENT

(An article by Maurice Mendoza, first Chairman of the Friends, reprinted from *Aspects of The Ridgeway*)

I was first enchanted by the Ridgeway over forty years ago. I had just started as a clerk in what was then the Ancient Monuments Secretariat of the Office of Records. I had begun straight from my grammar school in the East End of London . Like many a young man in those days before the war I was innocent, impressionable and very open to romantic influences.

My chief, Dr Frederick Raby, an outstanding scholar and accomplished Latinist — he afterwards edited the Oxford Book of Mediaeval Latin Verse — took me with him on a visit to Alexander Keiller, then engaged on his great work of preserving Avebury and restoring the prehistoric stone circles. While the two great men had luncheon, I walked to Overton Down and ate my sandwiches on the Ridgeway.

DOWNLAND PATHS GREETINGS CARDS

Cards are sold in packs of 5 cards and envelopes per pack..

Please send me packs @ £5 per pack (P&p included) £

Donation £

TOTAL £

Name and Address for delivery (please print clearly):

.....

Please send this form together with a cheque made payable to "The Friends of The Ridgeway" to:

FOTR Greetings Cards c/o Janet Hierons
 34 Oxford Street, Ramsbury
 Wiltshire SN8 2PS.

Even now, forty—five years later, I can still feel the profound emotion stirred in me by that empty, peaceful landscape — all sheep pasture then — so filled with the handiwork of prehistoric man. While I write this, far away from the Downs, I have a map of the area open in front of me. The sight of all those evocative names — Wansdyke, Adam’s Grave, The Sanctuary — bring back that wonderful mixture of nearness to nature and to history that I had the good fortune to experience at the age of seventeen.

Since that first, magical experience I have walked on the Ridgeway many times. It remains an enjoyable walk at all times of the year. In summer there is vicarious enjoyment to be got from the families and young children engaged in recreative walks and happy scampers. But the favourite time for me is in the winter when I can have the loneliness to myself. Then, I feel nearer to the countless thousands of our ancestors who have trod this way: the makers of Avebury and Stonehenge, the Roman soldiers on their way to bathe in the hot springs of Aquae Sulis, and the farmers and drovers of the last thousand years. Of course I regret the passing of the springy sheep pastures with their carpets of downland flowers; barley prairies are so boring by comparison. But the landscape remains marvellously uncluttered, and the ever changing wide and open sky is as recreative as ever.

was lucky enough to end my career in the public service — after doing many other jobs — by heading the Directorate where I had started as a young clerk so many years before. The task had become a good deal larger and included responsibility for Royal Palaces and Royal Parks as well as historic buildings and ancient monuments throughout England. For all that, it was a most romantic homecoming. On my first free day —I celebrated by making a sentimental and private journey to Avebury and walking up to the Ridgeway, as I had done forty years before. The breathing was a bit more laboured, but the emotion was much the same.

**Contributions to the Winter Newsletter by
 5th January please**

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Items for the website are gladly received at any time

The Friends of The Ridgeway is a registered charity (No 1107926). its objects are the preservation for the benefit of the public of all the natural aspects and features of the Ridgeway National Trail and the provision of recreational and educational facilities in the interests of social welfare for the public benefit